

WRITING A MORAL PHILOSOPHY PAPER: SOME HINTS

1. Make sure you understand the question or topic as posed. If the question contains ambiguous or theoretical terms, explain clearly what you understand by any such terms when you first use them. Ask: What's the point of the question? What underlying issue or issues is the question calling on you to address?

2. Know what course materials--readings, handouts, lectures, etc.--are relevant to the question as you understand it.

3. If the question asks you to interpret a course reading, be charitable. A charitable interpretation of an argument in a text renders the argument as strong and plausible as it can be under the constraint of compatibility with the words of the text. A charitable revision or reconstruction of an argument changes the argument so that it is stronger than it was as presented by author, yet the revised argument is consistent with the author's fundamental assumptions. An uncharitable interpretation of an argument renders that argument weaker than it would turn out to be on an alternative interpretation that fits the text equally well or better. (An unfriendly interpretation or revision of an argument, compared to some standard interpretation, renders the argument stronger and more plausible from the interpreter's standpoint, but not from the author's. The ultimate merit of an unfriendly interpretation or revision hinges on the merits of the standpoint from which it is made.)

4. In developing your position on an issue, keep in mind what an intelligent opponent would say in response.

Try to make your position responsive to your opponent's best case. At best, your essay should include a knockdown rebuttal of your opponent's best case. A secondary but very important ideal is that you exhibit in your essay your awareness of the limits of your own arguments. How damaging is the criticism I am making of position X? How might a defender of position X attempt to fend off my criticism? Can I defeat this further move? Assume for the sake of the argument that everything I say in criticism of position X is accepted as true. What then follows? Do my criticisms, if correct, show that position X is false? Or do they show that a common reason given in support of X is inadequate or inconclusive? Or what? Another way to put this point is that it is a merit in a philosophy paper that the author be able to take a detached and objective view of her own arguments, be self-consciously aware of what exactly they show and do not show, and be able to write so as to manifest this sophisticated understanding of her own position.

5. Be sure that what you say is pertinent to the topic you are discussing. (Hit the nail on the head.)

Sometimes one's favorite thought is unfortunately not relevant to any of the questions posed. The temptation to include the favorite thought in your essay anyway should be firmly resisted.

6. Don't thrash around.

Sometimes you have the inner conviction that you are close to a deep truth on some topic, but you can't quite put it in words. You may be correct in what you feel--you may indeed be on to something important. But if you can't clearly articulate your insight in plain words, it is probably better to leave it out of your paper. If the depths look inviting but murky, stay out of the deep water (in writing papers--this advice need not hold for life's activities generally!)

Sometimes you have a thought that sounds as though it should be connected somehow to the topic. Think through this supposed connection before including the thought in your paper. Your initial responses to a topic may well be scattershot and unfocused, but by the time you finish your final draft you should have organized your thoughts and presented them in an orderly way.

7. Notice slippage between the thought in your head and the words you have written.

A disciplined writer will read over a rough draft, asking herself, "What would I think these words mean, if anything, if I hadn't written them myself?" The answer to the question will indicate needed revisions. Often the words we write just don't say what we wish them to say and believe they say. They don't adequately convey our thoughts. At other times the thought in my head sounds sensible, but on paper it looks incoherent or obviously mistaken, and the explanation of this discrepancy is that my initial thought was confused even though it didn't seem to be.

8. Words like "Thus" and "Therefore" are used to signal the conclusion of an argument.

The sentences that precede a "Thus" should form an argument to the conclusion sentence that follows such a word.

9. Some sample ways to criticize a moral position:

a. The position relies on a concept that is incoherent or blurred.

Example: St. Thomas Aquinas held that homosexual acts are unnatural, hence morally wrong. Some philosophers have criticized this view on the ground that Aquinas's concept of the "unnatural" is unclear and, insofar as we do understand it, cannot bear the moral weight he places on it. Is farming with innovative techniques natural or unnatural? Is using a comb as a musical instrument natural or unnatural? If my arms are injured, is it natural or unnatural to eat toast with my toes? Is it natural or unnatural to make love to a woman known to be infertile? What picks out the class of natural acts and why should this class be in any way morally privileged?

b. The position has unnoticed undesirable implications. Once these implications are drawn out, the author must either revise the initial position or accept the implications that follow from it. Both alternatives may be unattractive to an author. The challenge here is that one cannot accept a principle and reject what follows logically from a principle. And

if you accept a principle, you must accept what follows from that principle conjoined to further true premises, such as true factual claims.

c. The position is internally inconsistent. To regain consistency, something must give. Crude example: If I hold "Killing is always wrong" and "It is not wrong to fight for one's country in a war of self-defense," my position is inconsistent.

d. The position relies on a factual claim that is false.

Example: A person might defend pacifism on the ground that wars always bring about more harm than good. First we need to get clear what is meant by "harm" and "good." It may then turn out to be false, demonstrably so, that no war ever brings about more good than harm so construed.

e. The position relies on a metaphysical (nonempirical) claim that there is good reason to reject.

Example: Someone might hold that criminal punishment is inappropriate because criminals lack (or have) free will. To evaluate such a claim one would need to inquire what the assertion about "free will" amounts to. On some interpretations, it could be a factual claim (one that observation could prove or disprove). On other interpretations, the claim would turn out to be metaphysical or nonfactual. If so, observation could not refute it, but there might be other reasons against it.

f. An argument from analogy can be criticized by showing that in morally important respects the analogy does not hold.

g. Deductive arguments can be criticized as invalid or unsound. A valid argument is such that if all its premises are true, the conclusion must be true. A sound argument is a valid argument with true premises.

Examples:

- | | |
|---|--|
| <p>1. All men are mortal.
Socrates is mortal.
Therefore, Socrates is a man.</p> | <p>2. All mammals are fish.
A cat is a mammal.
Therefore, cats are fish.</p> |
| <p>3. Some flounders are tasty.
All flounders are fish.
Therefore, some fish are tasty.</p> | |

Comment: 1 is invalid, as we see by noting that the premises can be true yet the conclusion is false (suppose Socrates is my pet spider). 2 is valid but unsound. 3 is sound.

10. It may help to distinguish two levels of understanding a text. You understand a text on the first level if you can accurately summarize the text in your own words, pick out and explain the skeleton of the argument the text makes, correctly apply the position the text asserts to hypothetical situations, etc. (If you're not sure whether or not you understand

a passage in a text, you might try throwing the text in the corner and seeing if you can explain what the author is saying in your own words to your roommate.) You understand a text on the second or critical level when you have an idea how to go about arguing for or against the position taken in the text, can evaluate the arguments put forward by the author, can assess the force of criticisms brought forward against the position taken in the text, etc. Both levels of understanding are important. Most questions posed in this class call for understanding on both levels.

11. It helps to be as clear as you can be in your own mind about the structure of your paper. You should be able to write an introductory paragraph to your essay which outlines the structure of your argument. Having written a clear and accurate outline of your paper's main line of argument, you may or may not wish to include it in your final draft. Whether or not you decide to include it, writing the summary outline may well alert you to weaknesses, unclarities, or other matters that need revision in your paper.

12. Course readings, carefully examined, can give you increased understanding of how philosophical argument proceeds. You can use the readings as how-to-do-it manuals.

13. What sort of reader should one have in mind in writing an essay for a classroom assignment? The question is important because a characteristic weakness of student papers is that key ideas and concepts are left completely unexplained. (The student might think to herself, "I'm writing for the TA who knows it all anyway.") To avoid this pitfall, it would be helpful to address your paper to a hypothetical reader who is both very smart and entirely uninformed on the topic. As your imaginary reader is very uninformed, you must explain the philosophical terms, concepts, and principles you employ, but as your reader is presumed to be very quick on the uptake, you need not go on at great length about the basics.